For the love of books

Libraries are a bountiful means of knowledge. They have existed for centuries and have helped cultivate the habit of reading in us. Despite the rising dependence on multimedia channels in this technological age, libraries have prevailed and remain steadfast in their role as the keepers of knowledge.
A rich source of knowledge

School libraries perform three broad functions. As a fiction resource, including the provision of fiction books supported by professionals, a library can capture the child's interest so that reading becomes a positive and enjoyable experience. A library should provide a differentiated non-fiction collection that supports all aspects of the curriculum with structured support mechanisms that facilitate independent learning. Finally, there should be general interest resources for children wanting to spend purposeful non-directed time in a safe and welcoming space. Resources in this category do not need to focus on curriculum.

In today's wired world, though, almost any information is just a click away. Wikipedia knows everything. Children are able to google or bing information, and the fact that these names can be used as verbs speaks to the ubiquitous nature of these search engines. Many people suggest that libraries are becoming outdated by electronic resources and all the information available on the Internet. But the complexities of people's exposure to this information explosion make both physical and online centres managed by information professionals even more important for children, especially as they acquire independent learning skills and knowledge navigation, says Robert George, chief librarian at The Alice Smith School. Modern librarians are information professionals. It is school libraries working with the school's teaching staff that will transform today's children into the information- and digital-literate adults of the future. Libraries have never been more crucial than they are now.

Most Malaysian adults have developed skills in using libraries. School librarians need only provide a framework for this. It is safe to say that many take for granted a neutral feeling about libraries; chances are the school library was just a place to sit in during a free period, with a few resources that a child may or may not use, and a small and cheerless collection of fiction.

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Great libraries across the world

ANCIENT

The Royal Library of Alexandria

Also known as the Ancient Library of Alexandria, this was the largest and most significant great library in the ancient world. It was charged by its royal patron to collect all the world's knowledge and is the first known library to gather a serious collection of books from foreign countries.

It was so well-funded by royal mandate that librarians were able to travel to book fairs in Rhodes (Italy) and Athens (Greece). It also had a rather aggressive policy of taking books off every ship that came into the port, making copies of them and giving the copies to the owners while retaining the originals.

Containing works from the past as well as contemporary works in subjects such as mathematics, physics, astronomy, and natural sciences amongst others, the library was host to many international scholars and part of the School of Alexandria, a famed research institution.

Tragically, the library was accidentally burned down in 48 BC by Julius Caesar, who had set fire to his own ships while trying to fight back a march on the city.

CURRENT

The British Library

The national library of Britain, the British Library contains one of the largest collections of books and other materials in the world. Created in 1973, it turns 37 today. Despite its age, it contains comprehensive historical collections, the core of which is made of the foundation collections donations and acquisitions from the 18th century that include manuscripts from King George III.

The British Library benefits from the practice of legal deposit, a principle that automatically entitles it to receive a free copy of every book and electronic document published in Britain and every book published in the Republic of Ireland. A significant part of the library's collections is the Asia, Pacific and Africa Collections, which include the India Office Records, a large collection of documents relating to the administration of India spanning the period of British rule there.

The British Library Sound Archive contains more than a million discs and 185,000 tapes from all over the world, covering the entire range of recorded sound stretching back more than 100 years, from music, literature and drama to oral history and wildlife sounds.

MODERN DIGITAL

National Diet Library

The only national library in Japan, the National Diet Library was established 1948 as a research facility for members of the Diet of Japan (Japan's legislative). It uses the practice of legal deposit, collecting copies of all publications in Japan. Because of its purpose as a research library, it also contains an extensive collection of materials in foreign languages.

The library provides exhaustive online databases accessible from a detailed website in both Japanese and English. The National Diet Library Online Public Access Catalogue allows users to search the library's entire collection remotely, obtain certain materials through interlibrary loan and provides a reproduction service for overseas scholars. The library's entire collection of Meiji era (1868-1912) books, about 60,000 volumes, has been digitised and the database also contains images of these materials. Its rare book collection includes images from 37,000 illustrated books published before the Edo Period (1603-1868).

PROGRAMMES

Queens Library

The public library for the Borough of Queens in New York, the Queens Library has become one of the largest public library systems in the US. It is the second largest in the country in terms of the size of its collection. It serves more than 2.2 million people, including a large immigrant population.

Queens Library has a myriad of programmes aimed at children and teens, and even some for adults. The most popular is BOOST, the Best Out Of School Time programme, which provides homework materials and tutors for school children. Teens are able to tutor younger children, and may even get any fines on their library card waived for their service.

There are various learning and play groups for young children, including bilingual ones that include caregivers and family. Programmes aimed at adults include language classes and workshops, arts and crafts activities, parenting workshops that target specific needs such as Parenting Using Sign Language, and even yoga.
Yes, libraries can be great fun

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A modern school library should be the first place a child goes to gather information — a welcoming ‘open all hours’ operation that embraces the whole school community. Schools like Alice Smith are making an increasing investment in libraries, recognising their importance as a focal point in an educational institution. Their primary libraries are in three separate spaces that divide roughly as early years, lower primary and upper primary. Each of the spaces supports both fiction and non-fiction resources.

Children as young as four are able to use computers nowadays. Alice Smith, for example, looks to support modern technologies and integrate them where possible with their Virtual Learning Environment platform, which is accessible to all students. Despite the prevalence of online resources, though, most school libraries’ fiction provision will continue to be dominated by hard copy books due to expense and the lack of uniformity in electronic reader platforms. Also, the feeling of a book in the hand is still special for most people.

It is undoubtedly important to encourage a strong reading culture from an early age. Much of this love of reading is ideally inculcated through school mechanisms, but the impact will inevitably be greater where it overlaps with families who value literature.

For a school’s library to be successful, there need to be mechanisms that get exactly the right book into a child’s hands at the right time so that their enthusiasm is maintained. Another significant challenge is to try to avoid the children sticking too much to a single genre. Scheduling weekly library visits during the teaching day, as done in Alice Smith, is a good way of reaching this goal. Here, opportunities are also provided for children to borrow books at break, lunch and after school with their parents. One of the targets of Alice Smith’s library lessons is to encourage diversity both in terms of genre and balance between modern authors and the classics.

Maintaining an attractive and sophisticated library whether in a school or for the public is tough. They are expensive to keep in this condition, but unless they are attractive and sophisticated they will not be sufficiently patronised — a catch-22 situation. Malaysia’s neighbour Singapore has already blazed a path in this direction, becoming one of the world leaders with the National Library Board’s modern, well-stocked libraries. Singapore, of course, has a small high-density population and uses English as its national language, making this task considerably easier.

Malaysia’s multicultural nature creates complex language issues, says George. From a library perspective it would seem that any holistic library would need to support all main national language strands — Bahasa Malaysia, Mandarin, Tamil and English. Stocking publications in English would certainly improve Malaysians’ grasp of sophisticated English. In fact, as reading improves language skills, a child that reads extensively in any language will benefit.

Nowadays books face serious competition from 21st century pastimes. A library thus has the responsibility of ensuring that each child gets a positive experience with a book so that they are able to value what libraries can offer them throughout their school careers, and develop an enthusiastic lifelong reading habit. The acquisition of knowledge is one of the noblest pursuits of mankind; a library is the best place for a child to begin this journey.
Conditions for nurturing reading

By Julia Gabriel

Entering the world of reading and books can be a wonderful experience for a child. How exciting to discover that inside the covers of books lie myriad words just waiting for you to enter and enjoy. What a wonderful feeling it is to let your imagination soar on the power of words.

Nurturing positive reading habits will help make your child a reader for life. Here’s how:

Listening and responding
If you do nothing else, then do this. Read to your child. Reading to your child enhances all the skills and perceptions she needs for reading.

Remember, a child understands and appreciates far more than she can independently read.

Reading more than words
Reading is more than decoding words. Comprehension beyond word level is important if your child is to become a motivated and effective reader. Stop and talk about the story. Predict what might happen next, discuss whether you like a character in the story. This creates active engagement with the story and helps develop imagination, understanding and appreciation.

Talking about reading
Reading is a multi-purpose activity. It is functional when you read for specific information. It is a learning process when you read to understand something. And it relaxes and engages imagination when you lose yourself in the pleasure of a story or poem.

Using imagination
Follow the leader... and the leader in this case should be your child. The more books become a source of play and imagination, the stronger the motivation to read. Follow your child’s lead in exploring books imaginatively so that they come alive and are part of the world she actively experiences. Play games based on books, dress up as her favourite character from a book, create meals that a favourite character might enjoy, draw places and characters from her favourite stories.

Physical ability
Reading is a unique physical activity. Nowhere else (except in the related act of writing) does one engage in the kind of focusing reading calls for. Words and pictures demand fine focusing, control of eye movement in scanning print, as well as concentration on the activity for a period of time. Print material follows conventions. A child must come to understand that words and sentences go from left to right, how books open, that stories flow from page to page.

What a lot there is to master and understand — and this, before the actual cognitive act of decoding written language.

Reading as joy not work
The kind of reading that severely clips the wings of motivation is making your child read and correcting her as she does. This makes reading a chore, focusing her on difficulties and problems. However, if you make every reading experience joyful and safe, motivation soars. Praise your child’s efforts at reading, whether she is pointing out words she knows or reading entire lines. Make book buying an occasion and a real treat; give books as presents. Books must be seen as that part of life that brings joy if you want your child to reach for reading naturally and eagerly.

Julia Gabriel is the founder of the Julia Gabriel Centre for Learning that focuses on communications and learning. Its centre in Malaysia is located in Bangsar. For more information, visit www.juliagabriel.com